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ABSTRACT

This brief paper reflects one graduate instructor's efforts to bring about the use of qualitative action research in his classes through utilizing contract grading. Students select among various options such as demonstration teaching, peer coaching, shadowing, in school staff or PTA presentations, or other kinds of action research involving questionnaires and/or interview schedules. While qualitative research data is frequently soft and subjective in nature, the action researcher is permitted to be a participant observer and usually takes part in the action taking place. (Author)

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Reflecting on Action Research as Graduate Study

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Reflecting on Action Research
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Introduction

For the past two years I have been teaching master's level graduate courses again as fellow faculty members in my department have begun to retire. Since September, 1990, I have taught graduate curriculum, administration and supervision courses for our Elementary Education Department. As the graduate coordinator for our master's program in the Department, I also teach the final seminar in elementary education. The seminar course and the curriculum course are required courses in the program, and the other two courses are electives.

With all of my course work, I utilize contract grading. At the graduate level, this contract grading procedure, for me, typically requires a project and a paper for a "B" or an "A" grade. I encourage my students to do something practical with their projects and something theoretical with their papers. Ideally, students ought to try and tie the two assignments together so that the projects and the papers relate to one another. By having students integrate their work, it is my hope that they will develop greater depth and breadth and emerge with a gestalt regarding their topics of inquiry.

I request that students select one of several options with their projects. Students are welcomed to choose among action research, demonstration teaching, peer coaching, a staff development presentation, a PTA presentation or something else that would be helpful to them in their classrooms, schools or school systems. The contract reads as follows in my supervision course this semester:

5. Classroom/School Project: prepare a classroom/ school project for peer review of your own choosing to help you with your present work: action research, demonstration teaching, peer coaching, staff development presentation, PTA presentation--you decide what would be helpful; employ good writing form and style; bibliography and outline due on Monday, March 2, 1992, rough draft due on Monday, April 13, 1992, and final draft, typewritten, DUE on Monday, April 27, 1992. Plan to share verbally your project between April 13 and May 4 with the other members of the class; alert the instructor prior to your presentation as to when you wish to do so.

Students take the seminar course in the graduate program following a required research course, which is quantitatively oriented. Students may elect to do a seminar paper or a journal article in the seminar course with me. The seminar paper is usually the result of quantitative study and is prepared in much the same way as a graduate thesis. The journal article, on the other hand, is an alternative to the seminar paper, if for some reason the quantitative study cannot be carried out as anticipated. I ask students to take their problems, their reviews of the research and their methodologies and weave this information into journal articles. It is here that I encourage these students to engage in some sort of qualitative study to go beyond their own positions about their topics. Thus, if students lose their populations for intended treatments in their quantitative studies, they can still extend their studies in other ways qualitatively.

Those of us who utilize qualitative research make several assumptions about such research, which includes action research or the research that might be done in a teacher's own classroom.

First of all, qualitative research is messy, not neat, and it is context based rather than context controlled. Action research tends to raise more questions than it answers. Hypotheses are often developed rather than proven as the research is being carried out. Qualitative research is a kind of naturalistic inquiry as opposed to experimental or comparative study and answers questions about "what happens when?" versus "what is best?" Broadly descriptive, not narrowly focused, qualitative research generally deals with fewer numbers of subjects or maybe with only one subject. The action researcher is frequently a participant observer and usually is taking part in the action taking place. The data is frequently soft and subjective in nature in qualitative research, but nevertheless, qualitative research appears to be useful and valuable. Some examples of this kind of research follow in the rest of this paper.

Questionnaires, Interviews, Shadowing and Peer Coaching

Over the past four semesters, students have selected a variety of options. One student included a questionnaire with her quantitative study for her seminar paper, because her initial inquiry failed to tell her all she hoped to learn. She constructed a simple questionnaire to help her get at some of her research questions. The combined results of her study gave her a broader picture of her field of inquiry.

Another student did a paper on effective leadership. In order to make his paper come alive, he constructed an interview schedule for his project and interviewed three elementary school principals

to help determine what leadership qualities appear to be the most effective. He wrote at the conclusion of the semester about Principal A, who told him:

> "Remember what it's like to be a teacher. Teachers need support understanding, and the leader's awareness and appreciation of them as a 'whole' person. We must applaud their efforts even when making mistakes while taking risks. Recognize their growth, even when the steps are small." This administrator has a unique set of leadership qualities. She is a visionary who is sensitive to people and their needs. She leads by example. There is nothing that is beneath her or above her. She sorts the mail, answers the phone, presents at county-wide workshops, teaches classes, and mends hurt knees as well as hearts. She never speaks about others, except in a positive way, and models for her staff a flexibility, compassion, and a set of beliefs about what a school should be. Her success comes in part from the trust which she instills, the deep sense of her commitment to the children and staff of her school, and the unendingly creative ways in which she communicates her appreciation and respect for her staff.

I submit that it would be difficult to do any better than this in trying to synthesize theory and practice. This student, I believe, came away with a long lasting impression or gestalt about effective leadership through this action research experience.

Shadowing has been another effective way in which some students have gleaned insight about schoolhouse practice. I have one student in my supervision course this spring who is planning to shadow a central office supervisor in physical education. The same student also took my administration course in the fall, and in that course he shadowed an elementary school principal. In both instances, the student arranged or is arranging coverage for his classes so that he could or can be free for two days apiece with

each subject of his studies. The experience dictates minute-by-minute accounting for time spent, and so a log is maintained to be reviewed afterwards for some generalizations about the experiences undertaken.

My final example for this paper deals with a teacher-initiated peer coaching project. In last spring's supervision course, two students decided to work together. One student had had peer coaching training in her school system, but no one to work with in her school. The other student was not teaching and was anxious to work in a classroom to test out some of the supervisory theory espoused in the course. Their joint project turned out to be a happy marriage. The wrote in their Introduction:

> This project was developed on the premise that students of supervision have the responsibility for exploring, reviewing and planning new terrains in supervision. Eventually these 'students' may find themselves in a position to shape that process or its contents. Peer coaching was selected because it is gaining more acceptance in the educational community as a force to which supervision ought to accommodate.

The Project Goals . . . "were to understand the theory, research, and process underlying peer coaching and to appreciate some of the skills necessary for effective supervision." In the end, the students wrote:

> Participating as a coach in this project was enlightening. Peer coaching is more complex than it first seems. It requires careful planning and clarification of roles. General expectations need to be articulated. Technical skills are necessary in order to effectively note observations and analyze data. Involvement with this project also helped to point out the need to possess or develop productive interpersonal relations. An ability to withhold

> judgment or evaluation seems essential in order to build trust and establish collegiality. Additionally, coaches and supervisors need to be able to listen and respond effectively in order to uncover the teacher's perceptions and visions. This involves an effort to think of and interpret responses as the other individual might respond. The teacher's needs are paramount.

Conclusions and Implications

These initial efforts with action research in my graduate courses have been relatively successful, I think. Students have taken the assignments seriously, and I believe that they have come away with gestalts of their fields of inquiry and perhaps even the actual courses themselves. It seems to me that if students can arrive at ways and means to apply the theory they study in practical, useful terms, they are learning in the fullest sense of the word. The usual graduate papers take on new meaning if they amplify real life projects in the schoolhouse. Exploration becomes explanation as students gain increasing knowledge and skill through implementing their projects. At the same time students are learning new skills, they are also learning about themselves and their students. This practice of reflection is the heart of successful teaching and research. Action research has the potential to transform the educational enterprise as we encourage teachers to think about and research the everyday aspects of their world in the classroom and the schoolhouse. Reflecting upon one's students, the curriculum and instruction can only enhance the interaction that takes place daily in the classroom. To me, action research in my graduate courses has been a significant breakthrough for me and my students.

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